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The circulation of "New Music" between Afghanistan and its transnational community

by John Baily* (London, United Kingdom)

The background

I, along with my wife Veronica Doubleday,¹ have been engaged with the music of Afghanistan for the last 35 years. The foundation of my knowledge of Afghan music comes from 2 years fieldwork in Herat, and to a much lesser extent Kabul, in the 1970s. My first foray into the Afghan diaspora was in 1985, making the film *Amir: An Afghan refugee musician's life in Peshawar, Pakistan*. Since then I have conducted further fieldwork on Afghan music in Peshawar, in Mashad, New York, Herat (in 1994, in the interval between the communists and the Taliban) and Fremont (California). Since the defeat of the Taliban I made four visits to Kabul, where I set up a music school for the Aga Khan Music Initiative in Central Asia.

The Arts and Humanities Research Council in the UK has a Diasporas, Migration & Identities Programme, which in 2006 gave me funding to carry out research Afghan music in London, and London's connections with Kabul, Hamburg (with a very large Afghan colony), and Dublin (with a very small one). My paper today considers some of the more general questions that arise about the circulation of music between Afghanistan and the Afghan diaspora that my study raises. This is very much a preliminary report on work in progress.

The circulation of music in Afghanistan in the 1970s

From the late 1940s the radio station in Kabul had become the centre for innovation and patronage in the creation of a new popular music suitable for radio broadcasting. In a country where there was no university department of music, no conservatories, no music as part of the school curriculum, no national sound archive, the radio station was the centre of musical activity and creativity. It employed a large number of musicians, singers, male and female, and composers. It ran various orchestras and small ensembles. The radio station provided new possibilities for musicians, mostly singers, to be recruited from amateur backgrounds.

The best example is Ahmad Zahir, sometimes described as "the Afghan Elvis", whose music is still incredibly popular and widely emulated today. Remarkably, Ahmad Zahir was the son of a former Prime Minister of Afghanistan. Ahmad Zahir was much involved in creating and performing a modernised Afghan music, using western instruments, himself playing electric organ rather than harmonium. It is worth mentioning that Kabul's first international rock festival took place in 1975 (Dupree 1976). The radio station also promoted the careers of women singers, perhaps most notably Farida Mahwash, who in 1975 was given the honorific title of *Ustad* by the Afghan government.

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¹ See Veronica Doubleday's paper at the conference "The role of women and children's amateur music making in Afghanistan and the Afghan diaspora: considering continuity and change".

The radio station bestowed modernity, anonymity and respectability. The process of modernisation in Afghanistan was promoted and encouraged through a modernised music. Furthermore, I have argued, following ideas originally put forward by Mark Slobin, that radio music was much involved in the creation of some kind of a pan-Afghan national identity (Baily 1994).

In my article "Cross-cultural perspectives in popular music: the case of Afghanistan", published 1981, I proposed the following representation of what was going on with respect to Afghan popular music in Afghanistan:

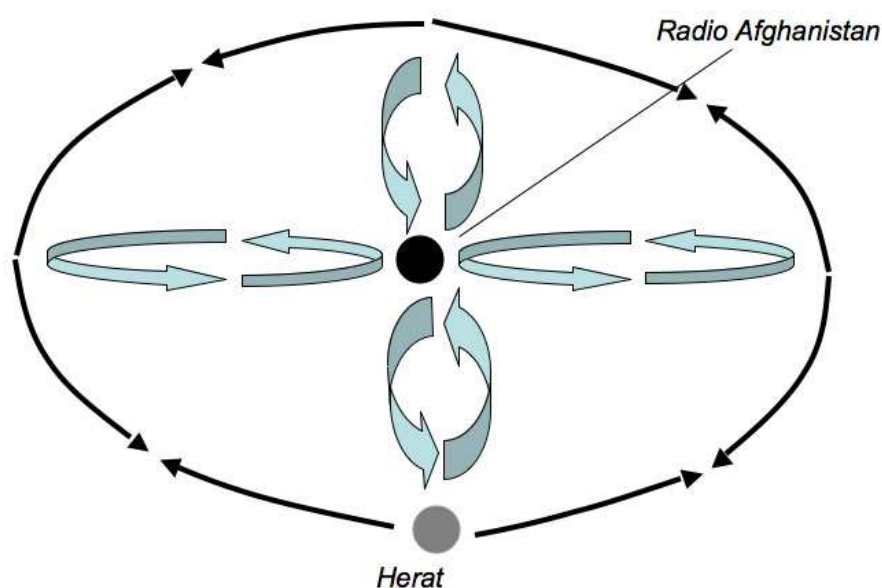


Figure 1. Centre and periphery of the *Kiliwali* network

The radio station in Kabul was the main centre for the creation of a new kind of popular music. My graphic representation shows the two-way traffic between the centre and the periphery. In the case of Herat there was a process of taking Herati songs (many but not all of them traditional songs of unknown authorship) to Kabul and turning them into popular radio songs performed with radio ensembles. The same process applied to the regional musics of other parts of Afghanistan. At the same time, there was the recreation of Kabul's popular radio music in Herat, using local ensembles, like *dutar* bands. Local musicians learned new songs from the radio and from audio-cassettes, which at this time were just becoming common. There was also communication between different sites in the periphery. For example, in Herat we could find items from the Mazari repertoire and the Logari repertoire. These borrowings were in part the results of visits by musicians to other parts of the country. What my diagram leaves out is the role of Indian film music as a model of what a popular music could be, and also Iran as a source of new popular songs, often transmitted to Kabul by Herati musicians who listened to Iranian radio or had access to Iranian popular music cassettes. The Iranian popular song "*Amineh chesm-to*" is a classic example, becoming widely known in Afghanistan and later in the Afghan diaspora.

This picture of has been dramatically changed by:

(a) civil war since 1978 - 2002, with the continuing insurgency today.

(b) increasingly anti-music ideology as the moderate Sufi-informed Islam of Afghanistan was replaced by more fundamentalist tendencies derived from Saudi Arabia, culminating in the Taliban's ban on musical instruments, and hence, of music.

(c) the mass migration of Afghans out of the country

(d) technological changes, electronic musical instruments, new media and internet.

How has Afghan music circulated since then and today?

In what ways has music as information been moved about in the "Afghan world community"? And where are today's centres of creativity?

Mass movements of people

In 1978 saw the beginning of a mass exodus to Pakistan and Iran. In the ensuing years people came and went across the borders with Pakistan and Iran according to conditions at the time. There were also significant migrations to Europe, especially to Germany, and to the USA, and later to Canada and Australia.

These mass movements of people inevitably included musicians, in the broad sense of performers, amateur and professional. Many musicians from originally amateur backgrounds, often from educated middle-class families, went to the West. There were generational differences, too, amongst them emigres. Big stars of radio from the 1960s and 1970s, such as Khyal, Zaland, and Mahwash, made their way to the USA. Then there was a younger set of musicians from Kabul who were active in the Communist era, such as Farhad Darya and Wahid Qassemi, members of the celebrated Baran group. And now we have a new generation of young Afghan musicians raised in the West, such as Qader Eshpari and Habib Qaderi both based in California.

The hereditary musicians of Afghanistan, often from poorly educated backgrounds, tended to relocate in nearby Pakistan and Iran. Musicians from Kabul's Kucheh Kharabat, the "Musicians' Quarter", went to Peshawar and Quetta. Musicians from Herat went to Mashad. Rather few hereditary musicians from the Kharabat went to the West. London is unusual in having five musicians from the hereditary musician families of Kabul. Ustad Asif Mahmood was the first to arrive, in 1990.

These migratory movements placed Afghans in contact with other kinds of music, in Pakistan, Iran, and in the West. Their interactions with local musics in these places led to various instances of interculturalism. In Pakistan there were new contacts with *qawwali* and an Afghan style of *qawwali* has developed. In the West, young Afghan musicians had the opportunity to take forward the Ahmad Zahir project, modernising Afghan music. The new Afghan music in Fremont, California, is documented in my 2005 paper "So Near, So Far: Kabul's Music in Exile", which discusses the claims of Qader Eshpari to be a pioneer of the new Afghan music.

Live performance

The various communities making up the Afghan diaspora have their own local singers and accompanists. In London one can identify half-a-dozen such individuals, they perform mainly at wedding parties and on festive occasions such as concerts held during the two *'Eids* and *Now Ruz*, and at the UK's New Year. They fulfil a ritual function, for music is an essential part of such festivities. But such local singers are not of great appeal for concerts in London. They are too well-known to local audiences. An Afghan concert is a rather different type of event and usually involves large sums of

money, with tickets selling for £15-£20. In London I found that Afghan promoters were mostly bringing artists from outside, from USA, Canada, Germany, Austria, Netherlands. They would usually be performers of the new Afghan music, dominated by keyboards, drum machines and drum pads. They performed a lot of music for dancing, and I soon realised that dancing was something of a contentious issue. There is an important difference between the *concert*, open to anybody with the price of a ticket, and the *family concert*, restricted to family groups. Open concerts tend to be dominated by large numbers of young men (a hundred or more) dancing together in front of the stage. Fights were said to be not uncommon amongst rival groups. The family concert was a much more sedate affair, with only a few dancers on the floor at a time. These concerts were usually professionally recorded, for release on CD/DVD. Like other aspects of the Afghan music scene in the West, these concerts were not for a non-Afghan audience, who simply did not know about such events, which were not advertised in the "world music" scene.

In Fremont in 2000 I found that a number of famous singers from Kabul, who were now in exile in Pakistan, had toured in USA, tours organised by Afghan businessmen. Amongst them were Rahim Bakhsh, Haji Hamahang, and Amir Mohammad. A number of Afghan singers based abroad, such as Farhad Darya, Wahid Qassimi and Qader Eshpari, have gone to Kabul to give concerts in venues like the sports stadium, where not so long before public floggings, amputations, and executions took place. Traditional musicians based in Afghanistan may be sent abroad as cultural ambassadors. The Aga Khan Music Initiative in Central Asia has organised several such events in Europe and the USA.

Recordings

As with concerts, there are separate domains of "world music" Afghan CDs, and CDs recorded and circulated within the Afghan community. A UK world music publication like *Songlines* will offer reviews of "world music" Afghan recordings but not those made within the communities. In Afghanistan the audio cassette remains important, but local music shops there also sell CDs, VCDs, DVDs and VHS video cassettes. The long-standing popularity of Bollywood film music continues. Ahmad Zahir is still a big seller. There are recording studios in Pakistan where Afghans go to make recordings, and Pakistan also produces a large number of pirated copies of CDs made by Afghan companies in the West. Thus, CDs of big stars like Habib Qaderi, Qader Eshpari, Wahid Qassemi, Amir Jan Saburi made in the West are copied for sale in Afghanistan.

Then there is the production of CDs by Afghan businesses in the West, an activity which presumably started in the 1980s. Many of these recordings of big stars in the West are made in the USA; Alexandria, Virginia, would seem to be a main centre for CD production. Hamburg, in Germany, is another important centre. The Kayhan Music studio in Hamburg which I visited as part of my research is quite sophisticated, with 24 track recording, bringing Afghan musicians from different parts of the world to record together. Some of these young Afghans in Germany have had a formal training in sound engineering. In the UK, in contrast, there is little studio production of CDs.

These recordings produced by Afghans are sold in the so-called Afghan markets, which specialise in the ingredients for Afghan cuisine, halal meat, Afghan bread, traditional dress for girls and young women, books and ornaments, and often stock a large number of audio and video recordings. At concerts, too, a stall of recordings is

often set up by a local entrepreneur. In the USA a CD sells for \$10. In Hamburg the cost is 5 Euros, while in Kabul a Pakistani-made copy is \$1.

Radio

Radio Afghanistan a pale shadow of its former self. It is grossly underfunded. When I was there last, in 2006, the sound archive was still in need of digitisation but I understand that process is now underway. The radio station employs a small number of musicians but the old infrastructure of composers and orchestras has not been rebuilt. There has been a sustained battle for women's singing voices to be heard, and at the moment they are broadcast.

In addition to Radio Afghanistan there are many "independent" local FM radio stations, often funded by western nations hoping to bring western ways to Afghanistan, like Voice of America. These local radio stations play a lot of music. They were also broadcasting women singers at a time when Radio Afghanistan was not able to do so.

The BBC World Service has a strong presence in Afghanistan and in the diaspora. The BBC has made a big investment in music, in part to compensate for the anti-music policies of the Taliban, and because it was realised that music attracts listeners, who can then appreciate the BBC's news broadcasting. I attended a BBC World Service live interactive music programme called *Studio 7* a number of times. The presenter is Haroon Yousoufi, one of the best informed Afghans about the life of Afghan music around the world. Each week there is a special guest connected to the studio in London via satellite. The guest is announced beforehand on the programme's website, and Afghans all over the world phone in to indicate they would like to speak to the special guest. When the programme is broadcast a succession of these people are phoned back from London, and talk to Haroon and the guest. Haroon's wife Amineh Yousoufi, who also works for the BBC, has her own women's radio programme, where women, especially from Afghanistan, phone in on their mobile telephones to talk to Amineh, who encourages them to sing over the phone (unaccompanied). Afghan women all over the world are thus able to hear the voices of ordinary women in Afghanistan.

Television

Television broadcasting in Kabul started in about 1979, and some provincial cities came to have their own local TV studios. During the time of the Coalition Government (1992-96) television broadcasting was very limited, and ceased altogether during the Taliban era, although, interestingly enough, the Taliban did not destroy the TV studios. Ariana Afghanistan TV from Los Angeles, satellite, is received across the world. Another channel, also called Ariana TV, has recently started broadcasting from Kabul. In Kabul also there is the highly controversial Tolo TV, noted for its progressive and even daring programming. One young woman presenter was murdered, apparently by her family, for dishonouring the family's name. Another young male presenter was threatened after screening a Madonna clip and had to flee to Sweden, where he has been granted political asylum.

Internet

This is becoming of great importance for communication within the Afghan diaspora. This is an area for further research.

What types of music are being they communicated?

To some extent traditional music is being circulated, both art music and regional "folk" musics, usually music that was recorded in the past. Thus, one can find many recordings of Ustad Sarahang, a few of Ustad Mohammad Omar. Salaam Logari, Faiz-e Karizi, Alem-e Shauqi are regional singers from areas near Kabul who continue to find an audience. The recordings of Ahmad Zahir are plentiful, both those originally released on cassette by companies like Afghan Music, and originally private recordings made at concerts and small parties.

Much of the music in circulation is modern, the new Afghan music, generally up-tempo dance music played on keyboards, drum pads and drum machines, sometimes with more traditional instruments added, such as tabla, harmonium and rubab. Much of it is based on the music of the past, such as Ahmad Zahir songs and other favourites from the past. The lyrics of newly composed songs would seem to be light in content, mainly love songs, and some songs about Afghanistan. Reliance on synthesised drum patterns tends to mean the disappearance of the subtle changes in tempo and rhythmic cadences that are so characteristic of much traditional Afghan music.

Redrawing the musical map

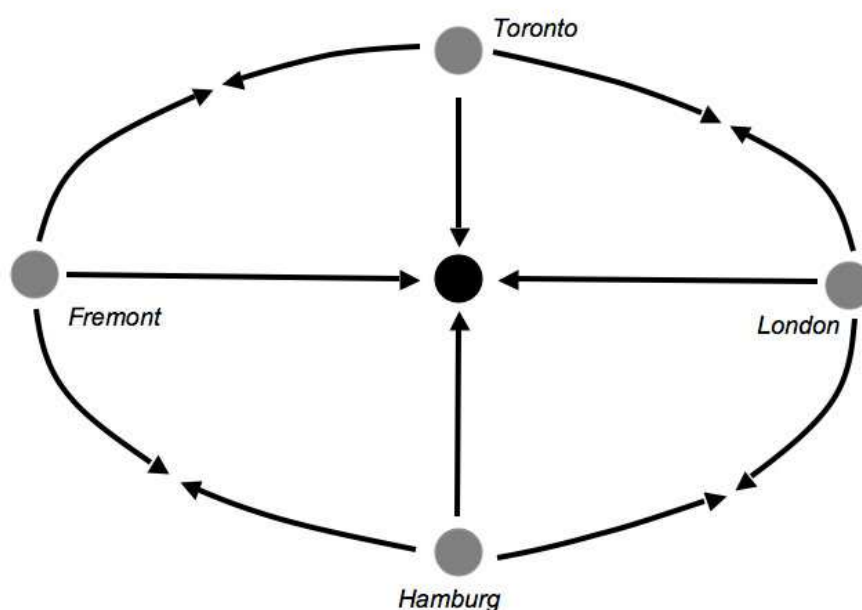


Figure 2. The flow of Afghan music, 2007

Figure 2 represents how I think the flow of music between Kabul, the former centre of Afghan popular music, and the diaspora works today. It appears that what I tentatively label "the centres of creativity" are now located in the periphery, particularly in western countries such as the USA and Germany and feed into Kabul and Afghanistan. There is also a lot of circulation between the various sites in the periphery, again, especially those located in the West. And this picture in a way follows a more general pattern of economic flow, *from the diaspora, into* Afghanistan. Here I do not refer simply to economic aid from wealthier countries who are trying to support

Afghanistan, but through the remittances that Afghans abroad send to support their families back home.

However, I have certain problems with my own analysis, to do with issues of creativity. What kinds of creativity are we talking about? Despite the re-instrumentation of Afghan music - keyboards, drum machines and drum pads - there does not really appear to be much by way of innovation. So, is it just repetition of the old and familiar? Reyes (1999:143) quotes a remark about Vietnamese music in Orange County, California: "They never come up with anything new because they are trying to keep the memory of home alive so they use the same songs."

In terms of music, the Afghan diaspora is very different to those of Pakistanis or Indians, two other countries close to Afghanistan with large diasporic communities in the West. Their centres of musical creativity remain located in Pakistan and India. Diasporic musics are "supposed" to be centred on the homeland. But for Afghans that is not the case. The fact that their musical creativity has to come from outside indicates the special situation of the Afghan diaspora. One cannot perhaps expect Kabul to function today as a centre for creativity because the very institution that fostered such activity in the past - the radio station - is no longer fully functional.

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